

Committee on Resources

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Subcommittee Chairman Greg Walden (R-OR) Opening Statement

Since passage of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, many, I think, have developed the mistaken impression that the forest-fuels problem is over, that large, catastrophic fires are becoming a thing of the past. Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth. As important as the HFRA is, it only authorizes the treatment of 20 million acres, yet there are over 190 million acres of federal lands at high risk of catastrophic fire. Even if we effectively implement the HFRA, which won't be easy due to a continuing number of environmental appeals and lawsuits, we will still face large hot fires for years, if not decades, to come. To me this means Congress has two obligations, first to insure the aggressive implementation and expansion of projects under the HFRA, and second, to make sure our firefighting agencies are adequately prepared to face this and future fire seasons. The focus of this hearing is on the latter—to examine our readiness as we enter into what looks to be another long hot fire year.

Firefighting preparedness is a complex issue, made even more so this year by the recent release of the National Transportation Safety Board's report on airtanker accidents. Subsequently, the Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Interior canceled their large airtanker contracts--concerning many people in the West. The implications of this decision on our ability to fight fires, on the budget, and on the companies that own these tankers are substantial. In today's hearing we will address these important issues head on, but while we do, we will not forget that the bottom line is still safety. Our firefighters on the ground and in the air deserve the safest conditions we can provide.

As the severity of fire seasons has increased, budget problems and concerns have grown proportionally. One problem, in particular, is making it very difficult for the agencies to adequately fund key programs. Each year, due to the increase of large expensive fires, suppression money has become exhausted long before the wildfire season is over. This has forced the Forest Service to borrow money from other non-firefighting accounts. Consequently, serious harm has been done to the continuity and viability of Forest Service programs, including hazardous fuels reduction, essentially turning the Forest Service into the Fire Service.

Fortunately, thanks to Budget Chairmen Nussle and Nickles, language is currently included in the conference on the FY 2005 Budget Resolution that addresses this issue. If enacted, it will make available up to an additional \$500 million in supplemental appropriations for fire suppression activities for FY 2004 through FY 2006. This would give the Forest Service enough flexibility to fight fires while also continuing—rather than halting or suspending—important projects. Furthermore, it would also allow the implementation of HFRA, which will help to reduce and prevent catastrophic wildfire.

Though much remains to be done, this is an important step in the right direction. As the Chairman of the Subcommittee, I will continue to work on these vital issues. With that, I'd like to thank our witnesses for being here today and I look forward to your testimony.